Fam. XXIV, 12.

To an unknown correspondent, a reply to a lengthy and highly informative letter addressed to him in the name of the poet Homer from the realm of the dead.*

Francesco sends greetings to Homer, the prince of Greek poetry. For some time now I have meant to write you and would have done so except for my feeble command of your language. For I have enjoyed little fortune in learning Greek as happened to you with Latin, which you were wont to use with our authors' assistance, and which, through their descendants' negligence, you seem to have forgotten. Cut off from either means of communication, I had remained silent. One man has once again restored you to our age in Latin dress; and by Jove, your Penelope did not wait for her Ulysses any longer or more anxiously than I have for you. Already I had gradually lost all hope, for, aside from some opening lines of several of your poems, in which I viewed you as one beholds from a distance the uncertain and shimmering look of a desired friend or a glimpse of his streaming hair, nothing of yours had reached me in Latin—in short, I had no hope of seeing you at close quarters; for that little book that commonly passes as yours, though of uncertain authorship, and though it has been derived from yours and is ascribed to you, is certainly not yours. If he lives long enough, this man will restore you to us in your entirety; for he has already begun to let us enjoy fully not only the outstanding fruits of your divine works but also the charms of conversing with you. I recently tasted the Greek flavor of one of these in Latin dress, which made me plainly see the capabilities of a vigorous and keen intellect. Therefore, although Anneus Seneca writes that Cicero loses his customary eloquence in his poetry, and that Virgil's usual felicity of expression abandons him in his prose, and although the one interpreted many of your sayings while the other imitated you in even more things—both still remain the princes of Latin eloquence—nevertheless, I truly believe that only when compared with themselves rather than with others does each appear unequal or inferior. Otherwise, I have read verses by Cicero that are not disagreeable, and prose letters by Virgil that are not unpleasant. I am now experiencing this in your case as well, for although poetry is also your primary and particular specialty, and although, following a certain Jerome who is a skillful user of our language, I wrote that, once translated into either

*The identity of the correspondent who wrote Petrarch a letter purporting to be from the shade of Homer continues to remain a puzzle.

Latin or Greek prose, you seemingly are transformed from a very eloquent poet into one scarcely able to speak, yet now, surprising as it may appear, I find you pleasing though translated into Latin prose. I therefore wished to preface this letter with these thoughts so that there would be no surprise at my speaking to Virgil in verse but to you in prose. I spoke to him directly, but am replying to you; and so, in his case I have employed the idiom that we possess in common, in your case I have used not your ancient language, but a new tongue used in the letter addressed to me, a tongue that I employ daily, but I suppose is strange to you. And yet, why do I say "speak" to both of you when whatever anyone may say to either of you is mere "prattle." You are unapproachable, you are more than mortal, your heads pierce the clouds; still, as a child, I find it pleasant to babble with eloquent masters. But enough on the subject of style. I now come to the contents of your letter.

You complain of certain matters when you could justifiably complain of everything, for what is there, I ask, in human affairs that can escape just complaint? When, however, laments become ineffectual, they somehow cease to be justifiable; while lacking a just cause, they are without their desired effect, which consists in offering some remedy for the present and making provision for the future while condemning the past. And yet, since they can at times relieve a grieving soul, they must not be considered completely useless. Thus, your lengthy letter, O great one, abounds in such laments, but I wish that it had been longer since nothing ever seems too long unless accompanied by tediousness. Touching briefly on particular details, I must say that my mind, in its eagerness to know and to learn, experienced a boundless and unbelievable joy in seeing what you wrote about your teachers; they were previously unknown to me, I admit, but henceforth, to the merit of their great disciple, I shall venerate them. I found delight, too, in what you wrote concerning poetry's origins in the distant past and concerning the most ancient cultivators of the Muses, among whom, along with the well-known inhabitants of Helicon, you place Cadmus, son of Agenor, and a certain Hercules, who may or may not have been Alcides. Finally, I delighted in your words about your homeland, whose identity is very doubtful in our minds, remaining unclear even to you Greeks. I also enjoyed what you wrote about pilgrimages to Phoenicia and Egypt in search of knowledge, where several centuries after you famous philosophers traveled, including Pythagoras, Plato, and the most learned and venerable Solon, who gave laws to the Athenians and in later life became a devotee of the Pierides; during his lifetime he admired you, and after his death I imagine that he has become your intimate friend. Lastly, I enjoyed reading about your books, a large number of which

even the Italians, your nearest neighbors, do not know. These barbarians who surround us—would that we could be cut off from them not only by the lofty Alps but by the ocean's breadth—these barbarians, I say, have barely heard of your name, not to mention your works; let this serve as proof of the insignificance of this mortal fame to which we aspire so longingly. With such good news you have, however, mixed the bitter grief of the loss of your works. Unhappy me, thrice unhappy, and even more! How many things perish! Indeed, how little survives of all that our blind activities have accomplished under the revolving sun! O labors and cares of men, O brief and lost time, O vanity and pride over nothing! What are we, what do we do, what do we hope for, who indeed can now entertain hope in the dim light when the supreme sun of eloquence has suffered an eclipse? Who dares complain that anything of his has been lost, who can dare hope that any fruit of his labor will endure? A considerable portion of Homer's sleepless toil has perished, not so much for us—for no one loses what he did not possess—as for the Greeks, who in trying not to yield to us in anything, surpassed us even in our sloth and in our neglect of letters. They have surely lost many of Homer's works, which were for them as so many rays of light emanating from one of their two brightest stars; and so their blindness has made them unworthy of glorying in the possession of such a light. I was also deeply moved in reading your account of your end. For although that story of your death was widespread among us, and I myself, following that tradition, repeated it with some uncertainty in one of my works, I was nonetheless pleased, and, with your leave, still am pleased to entertain a better opinion of you and of Sophocles than to believe that in such divine intellects two highly disturbing passions of the mind, grief and joy, should have held such sway. As for Philemon's death, which is truly ridiculous if we accept hearsay, I have finally learned a more serious version: his death followed a period of unconsciousness due, not to excessive laughter, as is usually related, but to the power of profound meditation. But I return to you and to your fate, which you lament profusely and vehemently. Calm yourself, for I am certain that you can if, once free of your passions, you return to your true self.

You utter many complaints about your imitators, about your ungrateful and ignorant denigrators, with just cause if you were the only one to suffer such insults, and if, furthermore, what disturbs you were not common human traits. You must therefore resign yourself, for though you are admittedly the greatest in your class, you are not alone. As for imitators, what shall I say? In beholding yourself soaring so high on the wings of fantasy, you should have foreseen that imitators would never be lacking; it must be a source of delight for you that many wish to

It now remains for me to touch upon other minor complaints sprinkled throughout your letter. You complain of being mangled by your imitators; that had to be so, since no one was capable of grasping you in your entirety. You are indignant at their insulting you while being clothed in your spoils, but such is the common practice; no one can be truly ungrateful unless he has received some special favor. You lament that your name, once held in great honor by the early jurists and physicians, has now become subject to their successors' contempt, and you do not understand the reason. These men are truly very different from their predecessors, for if they were of like stamp, they would love and cherish the same things. Let your indignation cease, and your sorrow as well; be of good cheer. To have been displeasing to evil and ignorant men is the first sign of virtue and genius. The radiance of your genius is so brilliant that half-blind eyes cannot endure it; it is with you as with the sun, for which it is not considered a disgrace but the highest praise that feeble eyes and nocturnal birds flee from it. Among the ancients, and among the moderns as well, if even a faint spark of pristine valor still survives in any one of them, you are considered not only a holy philosopher, as you yourself say, but, as I have noted, greater and superior to any other, one who has concealed with a charming and transparent veil a very beautiful philosophy. How monstrous men view you is of no interest to you, or rather it is of the greatest interest, for you should wish not to please those whose scorn is the first step to glory, while the next step consists in not being recognized. Now lay aside, I beg you, your anxiety and sorrow, and return to the Elysian fields, which were your early abode, one worthy of you, from which you say you were driven by such absurdities. It does not behoove the mind of a wise man to be crushed by the affronts of fools. Otherwise, what or who would put an end to such an evil, considering the words of the Hebrew sage, "The number of fools is infinite." Truer words could not have been uttered, as is attested by any street, home, or public square.

What you next complain about so bitterly seemed laughable and utterly amusing to my ears, for even sweets taste bitter to the man with a bitter palate and stomach. You weep, when it would have been more fitting to rejoice, because a common friend, whom you consider a Thessalian and I a Byzantine, has forced you to wander or, if you prefer, to be an exile within the colorful walls of my native city. Rest assured that he has done this and continues to do it in good faith and out of the most sincere love for you. Primarily for this reason, he has become very dear to all the admirers of your glory, who, though quite rare, still do exist. See to it, then, that you not become angry with that very person to whom we all, as your admirers, render thanks in your name and

resemble you, but not many can. Why should you not rejoice, being assured of always occupying first place, when I, the least of men, rejoice, and not only rejoice, but even boast that I am now held in such esteem that there may be someone, if indeed there is, who wishes to follow and imitate me? I would rejoice even more should my imitators be such as to surpass me. I pray, not to your Apollo, but to my God, the true God of genius, that if anyone considers me worthy of imitation, he may overtake me with easy effort and even outstrip me. I shall believe myself truly fortunate and effective to discover among my friends—for no one is imitated unless he is loved—many who are my equal; and I shall believe myself even more fortunate if they surpass me, and from imitators become guides. For if a father's desire is for the son of his flesh to become greater than himself, what should an author desire for the child of his intellect? You who fear not that anyone be greater than you or overtake you, bear your imitators with patience, even though in the *Saturnalia* there is the unsettled controversy on the question of superiority between yourself and the one about whom you most complain, Virgil; what is more, some among us consider the issue a doubtful one, while others assign the crown unequivocally to Virgil. This I report to you not so much in support of or in opposition to either opinion, as to let you know posterity's varying opinions about you. Before continuing, it behooves me, O finest of guides, to defend Virgil, whose soul, according to Horace, is among the purest ever seen on earth. Not only true but commonly known is your statement about his imitating you, as well as many other things about which you maintain silence, perhaps out of shame or modesty; the main points are discussed in order in the *Saturnalia* along with his witty retort. Once rivals accused him of stealing some of your verses, to which he replied that it was a sign of power to have snatched the staff from Hercules; I have no doubt that you understand the veiled sarcasm of this witticism. But in order not to accuse one whom I was about to defend, as many do, I am in full agreement with all that you say. Yet I cannot calmly listen to your complaint that there is no mention of your name in his works despite his being overladen and bedecked with your spoils, while Lucan, as you correctly recall, acknowledges his indebtedness in grateful terms to the bard of Smyrna. I should even like to lend further support to your complaint. Flaccus often, and in noble words, mentions you; in a certain passage he expresses his preference for you over the philosophers, while elsewhere he assigns to you the foremost place among poets. Naso makes reference to you as do Juvenal and Statius. Why continue listing those who make mention of you? Nearly all of our writers have not been forgetful of you. "Why then," you will say, "should I

bear the ingratitude of him alone from whom I should deserve the greatest gratitude?" Before responding, I shall add yet another element to the dispute. Lest anyone believe that perhaps he was similarly ungrateful to all, know that he mentions Museus, Linus, and Orpheus, and not merely once, and others, too, such as Hesiod the Ascrean and Theocritus the Syracusan. Had there been any envy in him, he would never have done so; nor does he fail to mention even Varus and Gallus as well as other contemporaries. What then? Have I not aggravated your resentment all the more despite my promise to lessen or remove it? Without a doubt if I stopped with this. But details must be attended to, and, whatever else is done, all the evidence must be brought to bear, particularly if judgment is to be passed. Naturally, with Theocritus as his guide in the *Bucolica* and Hesiod in the *Georgica*, he named each in his proper place. "And why," you will say, "having chosen me as his third guide in his heroic poem, does he make no mention of me in his work?" He would have done so, believe me, having been the gentlest and most modest of men, and, as we find written of him, "a man of irreproachable life," were it not that death interfered. Though he mentions others where it was opportune and convenient, for you alone, to whom he was much more indebted, he was reserving a special place selected after careful consideration. And what was this, do you suppose, if not the most prominent and distinguished place of all? He thus was waiting for the end of his outstanding work, where he intended to exalt your name to the heavens as his guide in sonorous verses. Where, I ask, is it more fitting to exalt one's guide than at journey's end? You have good reason, then, to mourn his premature death. The Italian world mourns with you, but there is no reason to reprove your friend. That it is so you may glean from a similar but recent example; for just as he did with you, so was he imitated by Papinius Statius, whom I mentioned, a man renowned for his remarkable intellect, and possessing singular charm and sophistication. Yet he did not openly acknowledge him as his guide except at the end of his poetic journey. Although in a less conspicuous place he had declared himself the inferior in style, it was still at the close that he openly and in good faith paid the full debt of his grateful mind to the *Aeneid*. If he too had died prematurely, he would not have mentioned Virgil, just as Virgil did not mention you. I wish that I could persuade you that it is as I say. For it is surely so, unless I am mistaken, and if perchance it were otherwise, the more reasonable opinion should be preferred in doubtful matters. Let this suffice in defense of Virgil's major works; and if you turn to the *Iuveniles ludi*, clearly his first youthful creations, you will find your name therein.

It now remains for me to touch upon other minor complaints sprinkled throughout your letter. You complain of being mangled by your imitators; that had to be so, since no one was capable of grasping you in your entirety. You are indignant at their insulting you while being clothed in your spoils, but such is the common practice; no one can be truly ungrateful unless he has received some special favor. You lament that your name, once held in great honor by the early jurists and physicians, has now become subject to their successors' contempt, and you do not understand the reason. These men are truly very different from their predecessors, for if they were of like stamp, they would love and cherish the same things. Let your indignation cease, and your sorrow as well; be of good cheer. To have been displeasing to evil and ignorant men is the first sign of virtue and genius. The radiance of your genius is so brilliant that half-blind eyes cannot endure it; it is with you as with the sun, for which it is not considered a disgrace but the highest praise that feeble eyes and nocturnal birds flee from it. Among the ancients, and among the moderns as well, if even a faint spark of pristine valor still survives in any one of them, you are considered not only a holy philosopher, as you yourself say, but, as I have noted, greater and superior to any other, one who has concealed with a charming and transparent veil a very beautiful philosophy. How monstrous men view you is of no interest to you, or rather it is of the greatest interest, for you should wish not to please those whose scorn is the first step to glory, while the next step consists in not being recognized. Now lay aside, I beg you, your anxiety and sorrow, and return to the Elysian fields, which were your early abode, one worthy of you, from which you say you were driven by such absurdities. It does not behoove the mind of a wise man to be crushed by the affronts of fools. Otherwise, what or who would put an end to such an evil, considering the words of the Hebrew sage, "The number of fools is infinite." Truer words could not have been uttered, as is attested by any street, home, or public square.

What you next complain about so bitterly seemed laughable and utterly amusing to my ears, for even sweets taste bitter to the man with a bitter palate and stomach. You weep, when it would have been more fitting to rejoice, because a common friend, whom you consider a Thessalian and I a Byzantine, has forced you to wander or, if you prefer, to be an exile within the colorful walls of my native city. Rest assured that he has done this and continues to do it in good faith and out of the most sincere love for you. Primarily for this reason, he has become very dear to all the admirers of your glory, who, though quite rare, still do exist. See to it, then, that you not become angry with that very person to whom we all, as your admirers, render thanks in your name and

ours, since, heaven willing, he will restore you to us and to the Ausonian Muses from whom you were snatched. And do not be astonished that the Fiesole valley and the Arno's banks have begotten only three friends. It is enough, it is more than enough, it is more than I hoped, to have found in such a mercenary city three friends of the Muses. Yet do not despair, the city is large and populous; if you search for a fourth you will find him, and to these I can add a fifth who is deserving, crowned as he is with the Penean or the Alphean laurel. But I know not how transalpine Babylon stole him from us. Do you think it of small account that five such men should be gathered at one time and in one city? Search in other cities. That Bologna of yours for which you sigh, though a most magnificent seat of learning, contains only one even after a thorough search; Verona has two; Sulmona one; and Mantua one, unless divine things have directed him away from earthly concerns, for he has deserted your banners to seek refuge under those of Ptolemy. How astonishing that the head of the world, Rome, has been emptied of such inhabitants except for one! Perugia contains one who might have made a name for himself were it not that he neglected himself and abandoned not only Parnassus but the Apennines and Alps as well, and now in his old age roams throughout Spain scratching away on parchments to earn his livelihood. Other cities have reared still others, but all those whom I have known have migrated from this mortal dwelling to that common and eternal city. You can thus see what I would like: that you not continue lamenting that he has led you to a land that today may possess few friends and admirers for you, but surely more than any other. Do you not know how rare men of this ilk have always been even in your country? For in our day, unless I am mistaken, this friend of ours is the only one in all of Greece. There was another, formerly my teacher, who, having raised my highest hopes, forsook me by dying at the threshold of my studies, although he had already abandoned me previously when, by considering his own interests rather than mine, he was able to advance with my assistance to an episcopal office. This being the case, be satisfied with these few friends, and forgive this enfeebled age as you would have pardoned a more flourishing one. Once there were a few, now there are very few, and soon I predict that there will be none who will prize noble studies. Abide with these few as eagerly as you can, and do not take it upon yourself to exchange our river for any larger one. You are not a sailor nor indeed a fisherman; in point of fact, if the rumor is true, and I wish it were not, your discourse with such people was not very auspicious. You liked the small Castalian fount and the low and humble Helicon. May our Arno and our hills be pleasing to you, where noble springs of intellects gush forth and the delightful

nightingales build their nests. They are few indeed, I admit, but if, as I have said, you search near and far, they are many. Aside from these, what do you hope to find among the people except fullers, weavers, and smiths, not to mention imposters, publicans, thieves of various kinds, and thousands of kinds of cheats, hostile factions that are never lacking in deceit, anxious misers and their vain dealings, and the rank and smelly dregs of the mechanical arts? Among these, as an eagle among the night owls, as a lion among pigs, you must bear with courage their jeering, saying what Ennius, who was so inferior to you, once said: "I flit about in life on the lips of learned men." Let unlearned mouths ruminate their ignorance and their tasteless chattering; what matters it to you or to your situation that they either do not know you or ridicule you, when their praise is a respectable kind of blasphemy? But, as I am the least in intellect and in years, let me appear last and let our conversation turn to me. In your present adversity you request my assistance. O cruel and unkind fate, would that there were some power in me with which I might boast forever of having aided so great a man, an honor greater than I have yet attained or hope ever to attain! I call to witness Christ, who was unknown to you, that, save tender pity and loyal advice, I have nothing with which to come to your aid. For how can one who cannot help himself help another? Perhaps you have not heard that your disciples as well as yourself were reviled out of hatred for your name and declared insane by an assembly of insane? If this happened to you in your own age and in highly cultured Athens, what do you think will happen now to other poets in other cities devoted to the pursuit of pleasure? To the ignorant multitude I appear to be one of these; this astonishes me and I wonder why it is so. I wish that their reasons were sound, but it matters not how justifiable the reason for envy if envy itself is real. Do you seek refuge on my bosom? O insensate turn of fortune's wheel! Can this be true of you for whom no royal palace would be sufficiently spacious or resplendent were loftiness of intellect to bestow material honors just as fortune dispenses power. But it is not the case, and genius so often spurns the turrets and castles of the ignorant and delights in the isolated hut. For my part, although I may not be worthy of such a guest, still I have you in Greek in my home and, as much as has been possible, in Latin, and shortly I shall possess all of you, if your Thessalian would complete what he has begun. Know, too, that in order to consign you to a more secure place, I have prepared in the depths of my heart a retreat for you with great feeling and reverence. In sum, my love for you is brighter and more glowing than the sun, and my esteem so great that there can be none greater. This, O guide and father, I have done for you because

I was able to; to free you from the multitude's scorn would result in detracting from your uniquely sublime praises, certainly something beyond me and anyone else, unless there be someone who can put an end to the multitude's madness. Although this may be possible for God, He has yet to do so, and I believe that He will not. I have said many things as though you were present, but now upon emerging from these vivid flights of the imagination, I realize how far removed you are, and I fear that it may prove annoying for you to read so many things in the shadows, except that your lengthy letter was written from there. Farewell forever, and when you have returned to your place, do give my greetings to Orpheus and Linus, Euripides and the others.

From the land of the living, in the midland between the very limpid rivers Po, Ticino, Adda, and others, from which some say Milan derives its name, on 9 October of the year 1360 of this last era.

Fam. XXIV, 13.

To his Socrates, conclusion of this work.*

Just as this book began with your name, so will it end. You now have, my dear Socrates, what you wished, a volume of my trifles weaving together all sorts of things in a variety of styles, a work that will deservedly offend delicate ears. And yet, since man's spirit is capricious and changeable, tending to have its own preferences, perhaps there will be those who may not care for its contents, but who will like its very variety. Others will forgive me if they recall that I was led to it not voluntarily but by friends' entreaties, and that it results from my desire to please them. Nor have I been deterred by the opinion of critics or by my other duties or by the irreparable loss of time, so brief and so uncertain. If anything displeases you, you must ask not my pardon but your own, saying, "This is what I wanted; he could not deny me anything, having taken me more into account than himself." No better friend is there than the one who disregards his own reputation in a friend's behalf. Many men, including the worthiest, hold their reputation dearer than life or riches, and if this is sacrificed for a friend, then beyond any doubt he would sacrifice lesser things should the occasion demand. I began this work as a young man; I am completing it in my old age, or rather I am continuing it since it is the only one that death alone can end. What other end can I expect for my conversations with friends but the end of life? Or how could I possibly remain silent with them while still alive if I plan to speak to them with my cold lips from the grave? I have arranged this work not according to subjects but chronologically, with the exception of the last letters addressed to illustrious ancients, which I consciously brought together in one place because of their unity of character, and with the exception of the first letter, which, though written later, preceded its companions to serve as a preface; nearly all the others are arranged chronologically. Thus, the reader may, if he wishes, follow my progress and the course of my life. I confess, however, that in my desire to avoid repeating myself or some phrase two or more times I was unable to fulfill my original promise. I really tried, but a plethora of things interfered—the variety itself and the compelling distractions of a mind meanwhile intent on other matters. Since many other chores require the help of my pen and summon me to other tasks, since I know not how long I have to live, and this work has already grown enough and can hold no more without expansion beyond the proper

*See I, 1.

I was able to; to free you from the multitude's scorn would result in detracting from your uniquely sublime praises, certainly something beyond me and anyone else, unless there be someone who can put an end to the multitude's madness. Although this may be possible for God, He has yet to do so, and I believe that He will not. I have said many things as though you were present, but now upon emerging from these vivid flights of the imagination, I realize how far removed you are, and I fear that it may prove annoying for you to read so many things in the shadows, except that your lengthy letter was written from there. Farewell forever, and when you have returned to your place, do give my greetings to Orpheus and Linus, Euripides and the others.

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size for books of this sort, I have decided to insert into another volume any letters excluded and out of order here; and if I do write others, which will take their title from my age, they will be collected in another volume, provided that you, my dear friends, are still determined not to be deprived of any of my works, and provided, too, that I continue to give precedence to your wishes over mine. In the course of your fervent pleas you ought to have seen to it that, while you applaud all my works without distinction and wish nothing whatsover of mine to vanish, and while in your desire to please me you widely publicize things of mine that in my private judgment are not deserving, I not fall into the hands of critics who scorn every one else's works but their own, and, in esteeming and admiring these, are happy in the approbation of their own little circle. It is, my dear friends, to their criticism that you expose me defenseless and unarmed. I certainly cannot complain of your affection for me since nothing is dearer, but, as with everything else, there is a proper limit to love lest in wanting to do good, one does harm. You are too indulgent toward me, too well-disposed; you grant me too much, you press me too hard, in your love you pursue me too closely. Finally, I turn to you, most worthy reader, whoever you are, and I beseech you, in the name of our common enthusiasm for learning and your concern for your own reputation, not to be disturbed by the variety of subjects and the humility of my language, bearing in mind what I said about this in the preface to this work. Farewell.